GUNNER DEPEW

By Albert N. Depew

EX-GUNNER AND CHIEF PETTY OFFICER U. S. NAVY
MEMBER OF THE FOREIGN LEGION OF FRANCE
CAPTAIN GUN TURRET, FRENCH BATTLESHIP CASSARD
WINNER OF THE CROIX DE GUERRE

The other two spoke German and had been missing for at least three days and, I think, had escaped by this time. They were not returned while I was at Brandenburg.

This was about 7 a. m. They drilled us down to the little lake, where the cold was much greater, and kept us there until 5 p. m., without food or drink. At about eight that morning they found Fontaine in a French barracks and kicked him all the way to the lake where we were.

All day long we stood there, falling one by one and getting kicked or beaten each time until we dragged ourselves up again. Two or three died—I do not know the exact number. But we had enough strength, when ordered back to the barracks, to kick Fontaine ahead of us all the way. We did not get anything to eat until seven the next morning—twenty-four hours without food and water, ten of which were spent in the snow without any protection from the cold and wind. No wonder we kicked Fontaine for bringing this punishment on us and endangering the two who had escaped—he had simply strolled over to the French barracks and forgot to return.

Now, the food received was just about enough to keep us alive. I suppose, with true kultur, the Huns had figured out just how much it would take to keep a man on this side of the starvation line and gave us that much and no more. So we were always famished—always hungrier than you probably ever have been. But sometimes when we were ravenously hungry and could not hold out any longer we would trade rations.

One man would trade his whole ration for the next day for a half ration

One Man Would Trade His Whole Ration for the Next Day for Half a Ration Today.

today. That is, if you were so hungry that you thought you could not last out the day on your regular share, you would tell someone else that if he gave you half his share today you would give him all of yours tomorrow. If he was a gambler he would take you up. That is, he would gamble on his being alive tomorrow, not on your keeping your word. He knew you would come across with your ration the next day, and like as not, if you tried to keep it from him, he would kill you, and nobody would blame him.

It certainly was hard, when the next day came, to give up your whole ration and go without that day. But I never saw a man hedge, or even speak of it. And we did not have any food pirates among us either: we were not captains of industry by any means.

There were times when some of us could not eat certain of our rations. For instance, many and many a time I was as hungry as anybody could be, and I wanted to eat my bread, but it seemed as if I could not get it into my mouth. Then I would trade it with someone else for his "shadow soup" or his barley coffee.

We were dying every day in Brandenburg and after each death the senior men of that barracks would detail twelve of their number to go out for half an hour and dig the grave, while others made little crosses, on which they wrote or carved the man's name, when he was captured, and his regiment or ship. In the middle of the cross were always the letters, R. I. P.—Rest in Peace.

One time we were ordered to report to the German doctors for a serum treatment of some kind—to receive an injection, in other words. There was no choice about it this time, as we were simply herded together to the hospital barracks. Now, I knew what these things were like and how brutal the German doctors were in giving an injection, so I wanted to be the very first man and not have to witness the other men getting theirs.

So I pushed up to the head of the line, with the crew of H. M. S. Nomad, who had been captured in the Jutland battle, and by the time we got to the hospital was the very first man in line. But the sentry threw me back and there were several men ahead of me.

Each of them bared his chest and the doctors slashed them across the breast with a very thin knife, so you can see that it was very painful. When it came to my turn they slashed me three times in the shape of a triangle just to one side of the breast. And that was all there was to it—no injection, nothing on the knife that I could see.

Now, I do not know what the idea was. Every man of us was dizzy for the rest of the day and could not do anything but lay around the barracks. And hardly any of us died a drop though the gashes were deep. I do not think we had any blood in us to run, and that is the truth of it. It was

They Slashed Me Three Times.

just another German trick that no one could explain.

One day a war correspondent named Bennett, from a Chicago paper, came to the camp and went through all the barracks. When he came to our barracks I told him I was an American and asked for the news. Instead of answering he began to ask all sorts of questions. Finally, after I had told him I had been in the French service, I asked him if he could help me in any way. He answered that I had only myself to blame and that it served me right if I had been in one of the allied armies.

I did not like his looks much and he seemed unfriendly, but when he began smoking a cigarette it almost drove me crazy and I could not help asking for one. He refused me and said I should have stayed in my own country, where I could have had plenty of cigarettes.

After a while he threw away a cigarette stub and not only I but three or four others who were near made a dive for it. A man named Kelley got it—a crazy man who went around trying to eat wood and cloth and anything he could find.

When my three weeks were up and I had not heard from Mr. Gerard I was just about ready to go down to the lake and pick out a vacant spot and lay down in it. I really do not think I could have lasted two weeks longer. And just about that time, as I was walking back to barracks one day, a Frenchman showed me a German newspaper, and there in large type on the top of the first page it said that Mr. Gerard had left the country, or was getting ready to leave. They had to drag me the rest of the way to the barracks and throw snow on me before I came to.

[Gunner Depew's interview with Mr. Gerard took place at the Dulmen prison camp on or about February 1, 1917. On February 3, our state department demanded the release of sixty-two Americans captured on British vessels and held as prisoners in Germany. On the same day, President Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Germany. Ambassador Gerard left Germany exactly one week later. The newspaper that Gunner Depew saw must have been issued after February 19. It was not until March 9, 1917, however, that Gunner Depew was actually released from Brandenburg.—Editor's Note.]

I do not know what happened during the next few days.

But a week or so later the Spanish ambassador and four German officers and Swatts came to our barracks and the ambassador told me I would be released! It was all I could do to keep from fainting again. Then Swatts asked me in English if I had anything to say about the treatment in the camp, and I began to think maybe it was a frame-up of some kind, so all I said was, "When will I get out of here?" and he said, "Why, you will be released tomorrow."

I did not wait to hear any more, but rushed into the barracks again, singing and whistling and yelling as loud as I could. The boys told me my face was very red and I guess what little blood I had in my body had rushed to my head, because I could hardly walk for a few minutes.

Then the men began to think I was crazy, and none of them believed I would really be released, but that I was going to be sent to the mines, as so many were. But I believed it, and I just sat there on my bunk and began to dream of the food I would get and what I would eat first, and so on.

I did not sleep that night—just walked from barracks to barracks until they chased me away, and then walked up and down in my own barracks the rest of the night. When I got to the Russian barracks and told the two doctors my news, they would not believe me at all, although they knew there had been some important visitor at the camp.

But when I walked out of their door I said, "Dobra vetshav," which means "Good night!" Then they must have believed me, for they called me back, and all the men gave me addresses of people to write to in case I should get away.

They were all talking at once, and one of the doctors got very excited and got down on his knees with his hands in the air. "Albert," he said, "if you have the God-given luck to get out of Germany—not for my sake, but for the sake of us who are here in this hell-hole, promise me you will tell all the people wherever you go what they are doing to us here. Tell them not to send money, for we can't use money, and not meat—just bread, bread, bread—"

And when I looked around all the men were sitting on their beds crying and tearing their hair and saying, "bread, bread, bread," over and over again. Then each tried to give me something, as if to say that even if they did not get out, perhaps their button or belt or skull cap would get back to civilization.

When I left their barracks I began to cry, because it did not seem possible that I was going away, and already I could see them starving slowly, just as I had been starving.

The next morning a sentry came to my barracks, called out my name and took me to the commander of the camp. They searched me, and then drilled me back to barracks again. Then the men all thought they were just playing a joke on me, and they said so.

The same thing happened the next day, and when one of the men said that probably I would be slammed up against a wall and shot, I began to feel shaky, I can tell you.

But the third morning, after they had searched me, the commander said, "Well, you'll have to have a bath before you leave the country," and I was so glad that I did not mind about the bath, although I remembered the last one I had, and it did not agree very well with me. After the bath, they drilled me out into the road.

There were four sentries with me, but not Swatts, nor did I see him anywhere around, for which I was sorry. But all the boys came down to the barbed wire, or to the gate, and some were crying, and others were cheering, and all of them were very much excited. But after a minute or two they got together again and the last thing I heard was the song about packing up your old kit bag, and then, "Are we downhearted?—No!" They were certainly game lads.

They did not take me straight to the station, but took me through all the streets they could find, and as usual, the women were there with the bricks and spit. But I did not mind: I was used to it, and besides, it was the last time. So I just grinned at them, and thought that I was better off than they, because they had to stay in the hole called Germany.

I was still half naked, but I did not mind the two-hour wait on the station platform. I noticed a little sign that read, "Berlin 25 miles north," and that was the first time I had much of an idea where Brandenburg was.

When we got into the compartment and I found that the windows were not smashed I could not believe it at first until I remembered that this was not a prisoner train. We had a forty-eight hour ride to Lindau, which is on the Lake of Constance, and no food or water in that time. But still I did not mind it much. At Lindau they drilled me into a little house and took away all the addresses that I had, and then marched me over to the little boat which crosses the lake.

As I started up the gangway the last thing I received in Germany reached me—a crack across the back with a rifle!

The women and children on the dock had their fists up and were yelling, "American swine!" But I just laughed at them. And when I looked around the boat and saw no German soldiers — only Swiss civilians — I rubbed my eyes and could not believe it. When they gave me bread, which was what I had decided I wanted most of all back in the camp, I thought I was in heaven sure enough, and when, forty-five minutes later, we arrived at Rorschach in Switzerland, I finally knew I was free.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Back in the States.

After I arrived at Rorschach I was taken to a large hall, where I remained over night. There were three American flags on the walls, the first I had seen in a long time. I certainly did a fine job of sleeping that night. I think I slept twice as fast to make up for lost time.

In the morning I had a regular banquet for breakfast—eggs, coffee, bread and a small glass of wine. Even now, although I never pass up a meal, that breakfast is still easy to taste, and I sometimes wish I could enjoy another meal as much. But I guess I never shall have one that goes as good.

After breakfast they took me out on the steps of the hall and photographed me, after which I went to the railway station, with a young mob at my heels. It reminded me a bit of Germany—it was so different. Instead of bricks and bayonet jabs, the mob gave me cigarettes and chocolate and sandwiches. They also handed me questions—enough to keep me busy answering to this day if I could.

I got on the train to Zurich, and at every stop on the way there were more presents and more cameras and more questions. At St. Gallen they had cards ready for me to write on, and then they were going to send them to anybody I wished. The station at Zurich was packed with people, and I began to think I was a star for sure.

Francis B. Keene, the American consul general at Zurich, and his assistant, were there to meet me. We walked a few blocks to his office, and all the way the cameras were clicking and the chocolates and cigarettes piling up until I felt like Santa Claus on December 24th. After a little talk with Mr. Keene, he took me to the Stussehof hotel, where my wounds were dressed—and believe me, they needed it.

The Swiss certainly treated me well. Every time I came out on the streets they followed me around, and they used to give me money. But the money might just as well have been leather or lead—I could not spend it. Whenever I wanted to buy anything the shopkeeper would make me a present of it.

I also visited the Hotel Baur au Lac, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Harold McCormick of Chicago, who are doing such fine work with the Red Cross and are looking after the Belgian and

The Swiss Certainly Treated Me Well.

French refugees in Switzerland. It was a dinner, and much appreciated by one guest, at least. I need not mention his name, but he ate so much that he felt ashamed afterward.

I do not think he got in bad for it, though, for afterward Mr. and Mrs. McCormick each gave him a valuable present, which he needed badly. After the dinner Mrs. McCormick made a little patriotic speech, in which she said that the Huns would never trample on the United States flag, and some other things that made all the Americans there very proud, especially Mr. Keene and myself. So you see I was having a great time.

But I was having a little trouble, all the time, for this reason: there were quite a few Germans interned in Zurich, and they went about in uniform. Now, when I saw one of these birds and remembered what had been happening to me just a short time before my hands began to itch. Believe me, it was not "good morning" that I said to them. I enjoyed it all right; they were not in squads and had no arms, so it was hand to hand, and pie for me.

But Mr. Keene did not like it, I guess, for he called me to his office one morning and bawled me out for a while, and I promised to be good. "You're supposed to be neutral," he said. And I said, "Yes, and when I was torpedoed and taken prisoner, I was supposed to be neutral, too." But I said I would not look for trouble any more, and started back to the hotel.

But no sooner was I underway than a Hun private came along and began to laugh at me. My hands itched again, and I could not help but slam him a few. We went round and round for a while, and then the Hun reversed and went down instead. Mr. Keene saw us, or heard about it, so he told me I had better go to Berne.

So off I went, with my passport. But the same thing happened in Berne. I tried very hard, but I just could not keep my hands off the Germans. So I guess everybody thought it was a good thing to tell me good-by—anyway I was shipped into France, going direct to St. Nazaire and from there to Brest.

I made a short trip to Hull, England, with a letter from a man at Brandenburg to his wife. She was not at home, but I left the letter and returned to France. I was in France altogether about three weeks, and then went to Barcelona, Spain.

Then I took passage for the States on the C. Lopez y Lopez, a Spanish merchantman. We had mostly "Spigs" on board, which is navy slang for Spaniards. Almost every one of them had a large family of children and a raft of pets. We sailed down through Valencia, Almeria, Malaga, Cadiz and Las Palmas in the Canary islands. When we left Las Palmas we had a regular menagerie aboard—parrots, canary birds, dogs, monkeys and various beasts. The steerage of that boat was some sight, believe me.

We had boat drill all the way across, of course, and from the way those Spigs rushed about I knew that if a submarine got us the only thing that would be saved would be monkeys. But we did not even have a false alarm all the way over.

I arrived in New York during the month of July, 1917—two years and a half from the time I decided to go abroad to the war zone to get some excitement. I got it, and no mistake. New York harbor and the old statue of Liberty looked mighty good to me, you can bet.

So here I am, and sometimes I have to pinch myself to be sure of it. I certainly enjoy the food and warmth I get here, and except for an occasional pro-German I have no trouble with anybody. My wounds break open once in a while, and I am often bothered inside, on account of the gas I swallowed. They say I cannot get back into the service. It is tough to be knocked out before our own boys get into the scrap.

But I do not know. I am twenty-three year old, and probably have a lot to live for yet. I ought to settle down and be quiet for a while, but comfortable as I am, I think I will have to go to sea again. I think of it many times, and each time it is harder to stay ashore.

THE END.

TO TAXPAYERS

The tax books are now in the hands of the Sheriff of Lawrence county except for Upper Louisa precinct, and this is expected to be delivered about the 25th. So see your deputy and pay your tax, as a penalty of six per cent and six per cent interest will be added on and after December 1. 2t

Wm. TAYLOR, S. L. C.